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Out of View: Stories

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

OUT OF VIEW: STORIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Justin Bendell

2014

To: Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Justin Bendell, and entitled Out of View: Stories, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Debra Dean

Meri-Jane Rochelson

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 3, 2014

The thesis of Justin Bendell is approved.

Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2014

DEDICATION

To Karen Anne Bendell

1951-2010

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

OUT OF VIEW: STORIES

by

Justin Bendell

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

OUT OF VIEW is a collection of stories set in the American Southwest about people coping with loss—the death of parents, children, ideals, innocence.

The characters in this collection reap or resist lessons of life as they struggle to find their place in the world. In “First Rain,” 15-year-old Tessie struggles with the loss of her father and the demands of her mother as she navigates the rocky terrain of adolescence. In “Monsters,” middle-aged Maury has to choose between a new relationship and protecting the well-being of his 4-year-old daughter. The stories are influenced by the Western realism of Maile Meloy and the playful plotting of Ron Carlson.

These stories are inspired both by the Sonoran Desert—expansive, sun-soaked, unrepentant—and by the people who live, love, and lose in the interstices between Manifest Destiny and the Reconquista.

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I. WEST MESA

Matty Ortega stood in front of the Aztec Motel and lit the wrong end of his cigarette as the bus rushed off in a choke of dust. He dropped the butt in the gutter and pulled out another. It had snowed all morning and there was a crust of white on the sidewalk. Across the street, Western Gas-Mart's highway-sign rose high above the semis down-shifting on the interstate.

Two old Navajos stumbled up the sidewalk, talking and laughing in an ancient tongue. One of them pushed a yellow stroller full of cans. The other held a brown paper bag. Matty stepped out of their way.

"Going on a trip?" one said to Matty. He had a round face, a wisp of mustache, scrunchy, friendly eyes.

"No. I'm going to work."

"Well ya look like you're going somewhere."

Matty nodded. In a way of looking at it, he *was* going somewhere, he thought. For the first time since Charlie got nabbed, Matty felt his ship had finally righted. No small thanks to Alma, he hadn't dealt or robbed or drank in two years. He was lucky to have a woman like Alma, someone willing to put up with his bullshit and see him through. It was the little things—small talk, laughing at the evening news, the joint baths. Coming home to warm meals was nice too. The false turns of youth felt like a bad memory.

"You got another cigarette?" the other Navajo asked.

He was lanky, a white scar from ear to cheek on his left side. Matty pulled out a crumpled pack. Three cigarettes left. He handed him one.

“Thanks, brother.”

Matty watched them scuttle off, stopping at a gap in the chain link in front of the motel. The motel was a long-closed Route 66 relic, fenced and boarded. There were dozens like it on this stretch of Central. The round-faced man pulled the fence apart and Lanky ducked through with the stroller. They shuffled through the thin powder snow to one of the boarded rooms. The man with the shopping cart leaned into it, grunted a bit, and pried the plywood off the doorway. They went inside, sealing it up behind them.

They probably had family somewhere, a mother or a wife or a kid or two, someone worried about where they were. Matty thought of Alma walking to her part-time job at the Dollar Store in the cold. That morning, she’d dropped the pregnancy test on the bed. Matty was still under the quilt, half in dream.

“Thoughts?” she said.

He grabbed the plastic stick and, when his eyes adjusted to the grainy morning light, studied it. A positive sign.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

He dropped the stick on the quilt and turned on his side. “What now?”

“We need money, Matty. Ask for a raise,” she said.

“I’m still on probation.”

“So what? You’ve been a model employee. That’s what you tell me. Is it true? I don’t know.”

“I pay for my fucking hot dogs.”

“Well then. Ask for a raise. What’s the worst they could do? Unless—”

“Alma. . .”

“It’s an option, regardless of what my mother says. Don’t discount it.”

Matty rolled onto his back, covered his face with a pillow, and groaned. Then he set the pillow on the bed. “I’ll ask for a raise.”

The clouds were thick and gray, heavy with snow. He checked his phone. Three minutes till his shift. He worked 11-8 today and 8-5 tomorrow. He hated the quick turn-around but he never complained. Not a fuss. Five months of shit and he hadn’t even been late once. Lamar would understand his need for more money. He took his management position too seriously, sat a little high on his horse, but at the end of the day Lamar was just a guy. House with a mortgage, wife, two toddlers. He’d understand. Matty flicked his cig into the gutter and, looking both ways, crossed Central to work.

A whip of cold air chased him through the automatic doors. Glare of fluorescent lights and Don Henley on the satellite radio. Carla was standing at the register with big dumb eyes, hair blown out like cotton candy. Matty smelled her fruit-flavored Trident from ten feet away.

“Is Lamar in yet?”

She shrugged.

“When’s he coming in?”

“Fuck if I know.” She returned to filing her nails.

He grabbed his apron and got to work. Re-stocked the chips. Refilled the drink cooler. Customers came in, paid for gas and hot dogs and Twix and left. Matty assessed the hot dog condiment station. Out of mustard, jalapenos. Alma hated pickled jalapenos. *Stick ‘em in vinegar they lose everything.* Alma. She thought prayers and positive energy

were all you needed. She said, “have faith, be like light.” Matty had a hard time buying the new age shit. Too much wishful thinking from a girl who used to drink vodka by the bottle. He never admitted to distrusting her methods, knowing full-well that his position was tenuous enough. But back before Alma, things were different. Back then, he knew how to get by. When he wanted something, he took it. Then again, maybe Alma’s ways were rubbing off on him. He had gotten out of the drug biz, got cleaned up. Kept a regular job with regular pay. Now he was going to be a father.

The delivery bell sounded as he was refilling the jalapenos. He went to the back door, pushed it open against the biting wind. The delivery guy was tall and broad-shouldered, a Sunshine Food Co. cap, brim pulled to his brow.

“Come in,” Matty said, distracted by customers hovering around the condiment bar.

The delivery guy socked him in the shoulder. “Jesus Christ, bro, you blind?”

Matty turned, confused by the voice. He scrutinized the man’s face, acne-scarred and brim-shadowed. “Charlie?”

“No shit, Charlie.” Charlie said, then laughed. “I’m here for that swag you’re selling. Guy in the joint said you’re running biz out of the walk-in.” Charlie smiled, flash of gold tooth. His laugh was thin and damp, a mountain stream gone dry. Charlie Frame, high school drop-out. Ex-con. Matty’s best friend. They embraced.

Matty said, “All I’m selling is gas and chips. When’d you get out?”

“Two months ago.”

“Two months? What have you been up to?”

“Getting my feet wet.”

“Lawful employment, I see.” Matty nodded to the cap. Then he looked out on the lot, expecting to see a delivery truck. But there was no delivery truck, just a red Dodge Ram.

“It’s just a hat,” Charlie said. He pulled it off and studied it. “Got it at Savers.” He returned it to his head.

Matty nodded to the Dodge. “Gasket fixed?”

“Yeah. My cousin—you remember Case—took care of it. So what’s the scoop with you?”

“Same as ever.”

“Burque hasn’t changed,” Charlie said. “Still a piece of shit.”

Matty nodded.

“You still in the game?”

Matty shook his head, looked over his shoulder to be sure Carla wasn’t overhearing. “No, man. I’m out.”

“Out? My ass.” Charlie tapped his shirt pocket. “You wanna smoke?”

“I mean I quit. I’m clean. All of it.”

“Bullshit.”

“Bull true.”

“C’mon, Matty. I know you. Just a couple puffs, for old time’s sake. You owe me this.”

“I didn’t rat you out.”

“I didn’t say you did,” he said, half-smiling, “though it’s funny you said it.”